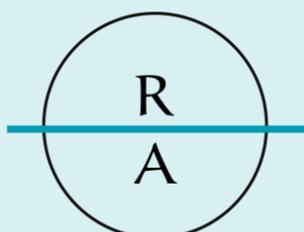


AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO STUDENTS WITH TRAUMATIC BACKGROUNDS



RAD ADVOCATES

Most educators encounter students with reactive attachment disorder (RAD), the aftermath of trauma, at some point in their careers. Traditional classroom management techniques do not work for these students. Yet, few educators receive the training necessary to identify and work with children with the disorder. While the tips below can help give a baseline of knowledge, we advise educators to continue seeking education/training about the disorder.

WHAT IS RAD?

RAD results from long-term exposure to trauma—typically abuse and neglect (but can include other traumatic events such as community violence or extended medical complications)—during the first few years of life.

For these children, their trauma hindered brain development during critical early stages while, simultaneously, fight-or-flight neural pathways strengthened. Their brains remain "stuck" from those times, left with the cognitive abilities of a young child and maladaptive behaviors.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE IN A STUDENT WITH RAD



- **Trouble with peers** - may struggle to maintain friendships, get bullied, or bully others.
- **Lack of forethought** - relies upon maladaptive coping strategies to feel an immediate sense of comfort without regard for consequences
- **Lack of appropriate boundaries**
- **Developmental delays or learning disabilities**
- **Manipulative**
Children with RAD attempt to take control due to their maladaptive survival response to trauma. While their behaviors are overt at times, many children take control in subtle ways. Such behaviors may include:
 - Meltdowns or angry outbursts, constant interruptions of the teacher, or excessive bathroom breaks
 - Superficial charm in public (yet rages and displays other acting out behaviors in the presence of the primary caregiver)
 - Manipulation and lying, either to avoid consequences or for no apparent reason at all
 - Triangulation (children with RAD often weaken teams of adults working to assist them, often by raising unwarranted suspicion and concern about a family member)

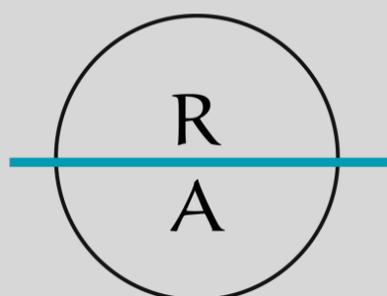
INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

- **Behavior modification** - The child's need for control will override your attempts to externally motivate them. In fact, sticker charts, etc. give opportunities for the child to manipulate and control.
- **Multiple warnings** - A child with RAD perceives adults who do not follow through as weak, confirming their belief that adults are not trustworthy. This only adds to their feelings of insecurity and, therefore, misbehavior.
- **Punishment** - These students feel an innate sense of worthlessness. Reprimanding them, especially in public, only perpetuates an ineffective cycle of misbehavior and punishment.
- **Zero-tolerance policies** - This tactic leaves teachers with little latitude when the student refuses to comply.
- **Focusing on "why"** - Asking the student to explain their behaviors is counterproductive as they lack analytical, abstract, and cause-and-effect thinking.
- **Attempts to build a relationship with the child** - While it may feel strange and counterintuitive, to attempt to build a connection with a student with RAD thwarts potential for attachment to their caregivers and, thus, their healing.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

- **Work as a team with the parent/guardian in the lead** - Support and trust the parent/guardian as an expert on the child. Work alongside them to understand the child's triggers and advocate for aligned and appropriate 504/IEP accommodations (including a crisis safety plan for the classroom).
- **Prevent triangulation** - Triangulation damages the family unit and distracts and disorients adults from the stability, consistency, and teamwork the child requires. Assume that you don't have the full story from the child. Maintain consistent, forthright, and direct communication with caregivers and others on the team. Let the child know that you check in with other adults on the team regularly, especially their primary caregiver(s).
- **Focus solely on teaching** - Your role is to educate, not connect, with a student with RAD. Find success in the child's family relationships rather than your relationship with the student. For example, avoid "I" statements (i.e., "I appreciate when you...") and emotions of any kind. Instead, report regularly to parents so they can praise or correct the child themselves.
- **Rely heavily on routines with limited choices** - Provide established routines and expectations in all circumstances. Give deliberate and specific choices consistent with parent/guardian values (but not unstructured free time).
- **Hold the child accountable discreetly and with natural consequences** - Privately state the facts about the behaviors you see from the child and share the cause-and-effect results of their actions.
- **Set the tone as a consistent and calm leader** - Always follow through on what you say and do, speak neutrally and matter-of-factly, and avoid power struggles. Do not take the child's behaviors personally, show emotion, or argue with the child.

SOURCES:



RAD ADVOCATES

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